
Mountain Infantry Company

Winter Raid

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Not many soldiers would argue with the need for an infantry unit to maneuver and sustain itself during combat in extreme cold weather conditions. But few infantry units regularly train for combat in a cold weather environment,

and even fewer are capable of executing that kind of training using only their organic assets.

The Army National Guard's 3d Battalion, 172d Infantry (Mountain), is one unit that trains regularly for combat in

extreme cold. In fact, it is the Army's only unit organized by MTOE (modified tables of organization and equipment) for both mission execution and sustainment operations in the cold and the mountains.

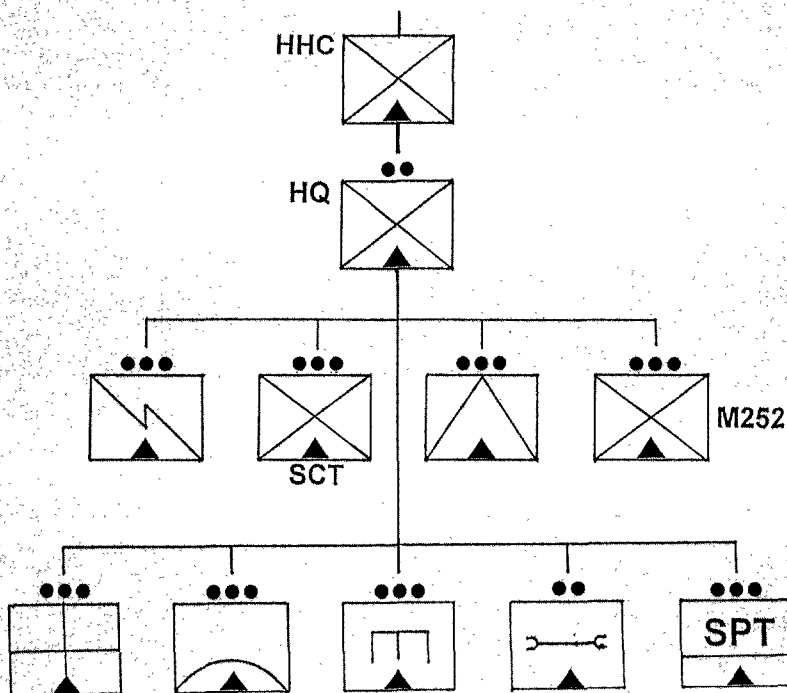
In March 1997 the battalion spent two weeks at Canadian Forces Base Val Cartier, in the mountains north of Quebec City, Canada, training in various infantry and specialized mountaineering tasks. The culminating event of this situational training exercise (STX) was a two-day company raid conducted in mountainous terrain covered with an average of 8 to 12 feet of snow, in temperatures that rarely exceeded minus 20 degrees Fahrenheit. I want to share the techniques my company, Company B, used in this STX, along with some training considerations for this kind of mission and the lessons the company learned.

The company used two primary means of movement over the snow—snowshoes and skis—and moved large items of equipment, Class I supplies, and ammunition either by ah-kio sled or small unit support vehicle (SUSV), a small, tracked vehicle capable of transporting two squads of soldiers and their equipment through deep snow. All of the battalion's organic direct and indirect fire weapons were integrated into the STX scenario, and the battalion was supported by a composite UH-1 helicopter detachment from National Guard units around New England.

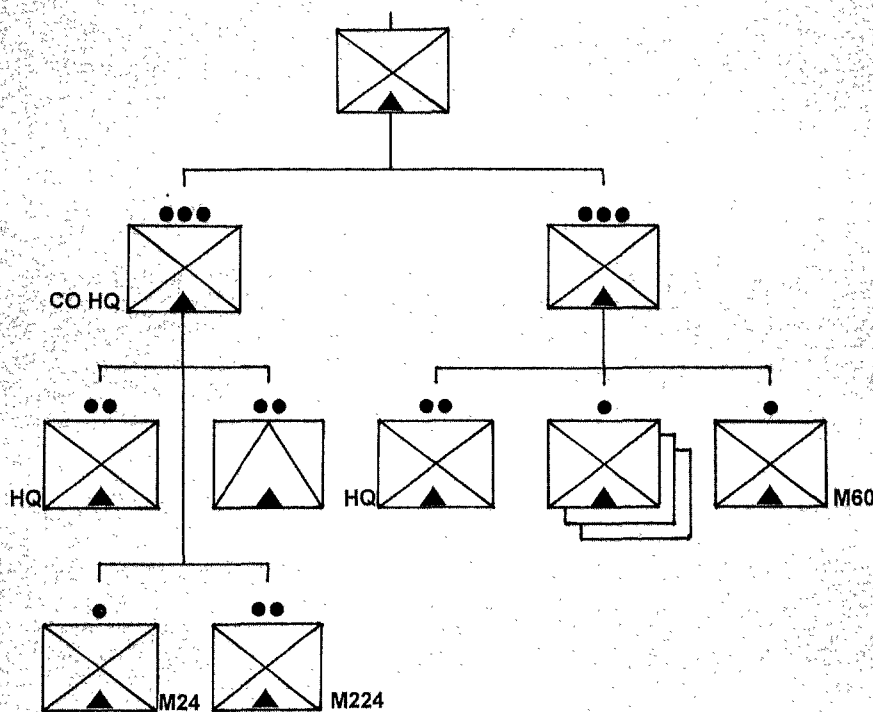
The battalion's organization differs from the standard light infantry MTOE in several ways, all of them designed to improve the battalion's ability to operate in alpine conditions. The battalion headquarters is located with the Army National Guard Mountain Warfare School at Ethan Allen Firing Range in Jericho, Vermont, with a headquarters and headquarters company (HHC) and three rifle companies located in Vermont, New Hampshire, Maine, and Rhode Island. The HHC contains the standard staff sections and specialty platoons, along with several nonstandard additions.

One of these additions is an organic platoon of mountain engineers, equipped with four HMMWVs (high-mobility multipurpose wheeled vehicles), one SUSV, and a range of equipment that enables them to conduct mobility, countermobility, and survivability missions in the mountains.

MOUNTAIN INFANTRY BATTALION HEADQUARTERS AND HEADQUARTERS COMPANY 25 OFFICERS AND 256 ENLISTED MEN



MOUNTAIN INFANTRY RIFLE COMPANY 5 OFFICERS AND 155 ENLISTED MEN



In addition to standard combat engineer tasks, the platoon trains on demolitions and building combat roads or

trails and small buildings or shelters. It has also regularly executed such tasks as building expedient suspension

bridges and mortar firing points in deep snow. This platoon's unique capabilities make it a major combat multiplier for the battalion.

The battalion's HHC also contains an organic Stinger section, and an enlarged medical platoon that can run two complete aid stations. The support platoon is equipped with both 2.5-ton trucks and SUSVs, which enable the battalion to conduct logistical package operations under normal conditions and over deep snow.

Members of the enlarged scout/sniper platoon are trained as lead/assault climbers, allowing them to establish assault climbing lanes and fixed-rope ascents for the battalion in addition to conducting normal scout platoon missions. Each rifle company is equipped with the standard range of light infantry weapons and equipment, but with three 60mm mortars instead of the normal two, and each rifle platoon has three three-man M60 machinegun teams organized into a ten-man weapons squad. Additionally, each company has an organic six-man scout/sniper section, allowing for extended reconnaissance missions independent of the battalion, a full range of assault climber missions, and a long-range precision fire capability at the company level. Each company has three HMMWVs and two SUSVs, and each rifle squad and section in the company has its own ahkio sled and 10-man arctic tent. All soldiers in the battalion are issued the full extreme cold weather clothing system (ECWCS), along with skis and snowshoes. Most of the leadership positions in the rifle companies are coded with the additional specialty indicator (ASI) E, Military Mountaineer.

STX Scenario

The scenario for the STX required the company to destroy a roadblock on a bridge held by a 20-man group of paramilitary militia. The bridge crossed a deep, fast-moving stream that had not frozen over, in spite of the cold. The opposing force (OPFOR) element had small arms and one medium machinegun and could be reinforced in 15 to 20 minutes. The snowdrifts on either side of the road and bridge reached up to 12

feet high, making the road itself resemble a deep trenchline. The OPFOR had dug tunnels and constructed frozen-snow fighting positions in the snowbanks along the roadblock, which consisted of a wire obstacle and some surface-laid mines. The OPFOR was expected to provide resistance, and the bridge had to remain intact to allow for civilian relief operations.

Concept of the Operation

Company B would be transported by SUSV to a point approximately three kilometers from the objective and would then move on foot to establish a patrol base. The tentative location for this patrol base was approximately two kilometers from the objective and was masked by a major hill mass. After conducting a complete reconnaissance of the objective using both maneuver elements and the scout/sniper section, the company would attack the roadblock at first light, and be extracted by helicopter after destroying the roadblock and either killing, capturing, or driving off the OPFOR.

Insertion Phase

The company was inserted by SUSVs during a driving snow and began moving to the patrol base on snowshoes. The heavy snowfall served to silence our movement and obscure our tracks as well. The headquarters section pulled one ahkio tent group to be used as an emergency warming tent. The company occupied the patrol base, and the platoons began digging snow caves for each buddy team; at each two-man position on the perimeter, one man would provide security while the other stayed warm in the snow cave. The headquarters element dug in and set up the ten-man arctic tent and Yukon stove, making sure it was camouflaged. The depth of the snow enabled us to dig the tent down far enough to be almost completely obscured.

Reconnaissance

On reaching the patrol base, the company scout/sniper section moved to an observation/firing position that had been tentatively identified during the

map reconnaissance. Because of the lack of leaf cover, the section's soldiers were forced to move with extreme caution. Despite their overwhite garments, the relative lack of concealment offered by the open hillsides—coupled with their track signature—significantly increased the possibility of compromise. Once the snipers were set in their observation post, a leader's recon left the patrol base, approaching the objective on a route chosen with the lack of leaf cover and the track signature in mind. Because of the snow, we were able to observe the objective at a distance and did not have to get close in to accomplish our mission. The reconnaissance element confirmed the basic plan and then returned to the patrol base using the trail that had been broken on the approach march to minimize the track signature.

The Raid

After returning to the patrol base, we completed our troop-leading procedures and continued to receive reports from the snipers, who maintained continuous surveillance on the objective. During the night before leaving the patrol base, the company's noncommissioned officers (NCOs) executed a plan for rotating the soldiers through the warming tent to see that they did not suffer from the extreme cold temperatures. At H-5 hours the support element of two machinegun squads, under the control of the executive officer, moved to link up and consolidate with the sniper section; then the entire element occupied a support-by-fire position on the mountain-side overwatching the objective 800 meters away.

At H-4 hours the assault element left the patrol base with half of the security element, while the other half, consisting of one squad with a Dragon team, moved to a position approximately 100 meters from the patrol base to seal off the objective from the north. The assault element moved to an objective rally point (ORP) 400 meters from the objective, while the other security element continued on and set in, sealing the objective from the south. Once security was established, a final leader's recon confirmed that the enemy dispo-

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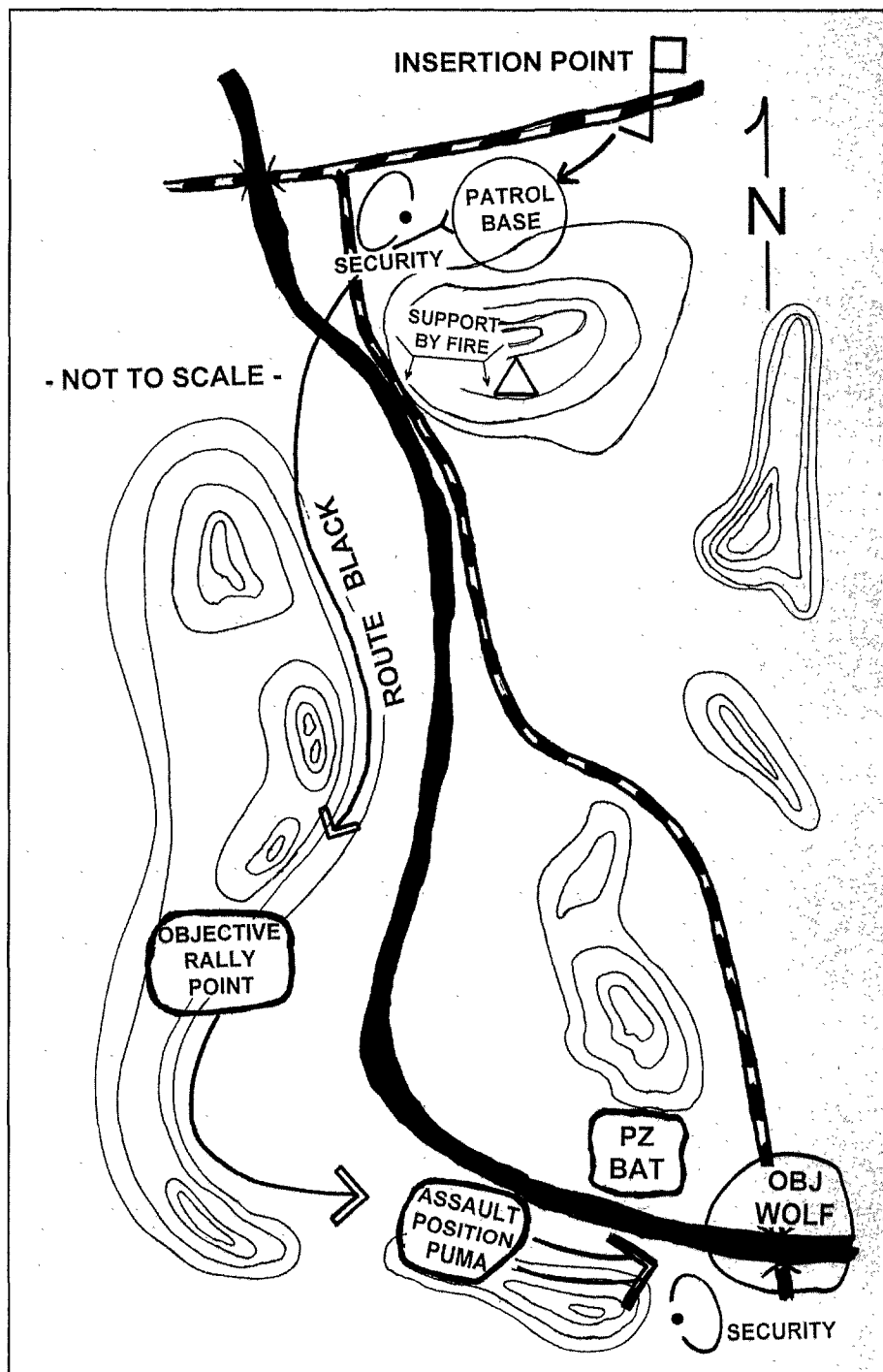
sitions had not changed, and the assault element of one rifle platoon with an attached engineer squad moved to an assault position. At H-5 minutes the mortar preparation began, fired by 60mm and 81mm mortars that were co-located and live-firing into an impact area while exercise observer-controllers simulated effects on the objective. Mortar fires on the objective were planned to be air bursts so as not to cause structural damage to the bridge.

At H-2 minutes the support element opened fire on the objective, initiating fires with shots from the snipers at targets identified during their observation the previous day. At H-hour the assault element moved out of the assault position while the support element shifted fires to targets on the eastern side of the objective. One squad from the assault element entered the road, followed by the engineers, and began clearing up to the obstacle while one squad provided suppressive fires from the tops of the snowbanks on either side of the road. The engineers breached the obstacle, and the assaulting squad continued up the road, clearing snow caves and fighting positions on the way. One squad followed in support while the third remained in reserve at the entry point to the road. After the obstacle was breached, the support element ceased fire and remained ready to help seal off the objective from the north. During the assault, the northern security element engaged an OPFOR vehicle attempting to get to the objective.

After clearing the objective, the company began to consolidate and reorganize, transporting casualties to the helicopter extraction point approximately 100 meters from the objective. The engineers inspected the bridge and disarmed demolition charges that the OPFOR had placed on it. The company was extracted by UH-1, with the assault element, support element, and security elements departing, in that order, and a small detachment left behind to secure the patrol base was extracted by SUSV.

Training

Companies in the mountain battalion follow a standard National Guard inactive duty training (IDT) and annual



training (AT) schedule, with a total of 48 unit training assembly (UTA) days and 15 AT days during the year. The battalion conducts its annual training in the summer one year and in the winter the next to remain proficient in its METL tasks in both temperate and extreme cold environments. The battalion's training focus is generally at the platoon level and below, emphasizing platoon and squad battle drills, and critical leader and soldier training tasks.

The battalion's units must also retain

their proficiency in mountain skill tasks such as *cross a vertical obstacle* (fixed rope ascent or assault climb), *conduct cliff assault*, and various oversnow mobility tasks such as snowshoe/ski movement, ice climbing, and skijoring. (Skijoring is a method of rapidly moving a group of soldiers on skis over snow by pulling them on a tow rope behind a SUSV). The battalion's soldiers also must train to retain expertise in fieldcraft and survivability tasks in an arctic/alpine environment.

Company B is better able to accomplish these mountain-specific tasks because of its core of experienced NCOs and soldiers who have attended the summer and winter phases of the Army National Guard Mountain Warfare School, and have therefore earned the military mountaineering ASI. Additionally, the company spends four of its IDT weekends (in November, January, February, and March) in the field in Maine to maintain unit proficiency in cold weather survivability. All collective training events, including squad and platoon STXs, include the requirement to execute a mountaineering task such as crossing a mountain stream, conducting a fixed rope ascent, and constructing suspension traverse or vertical-haul-lines. By regularly building training lanes that include cliffs, streams, and other natural obstacles, we ensure that leaders and soldiers remain proficient in specialized mountaineering tasks, along with regular infantry skills and collective tasks.

To ensure that the unit remains able to conduct operations in the cold and over deep snow, we regularly conduct STX training in the winter months. Additionally, we dedicate an IDT weekend, normally in January, to oversnow mobility training. This drill focuses on ski training—both cross-country and downhill—ice climbing, snowshoeing, and skijoring. The battalion's units often spend a weekend at a downhill ski area, training not only in basic techniques but also in rapid descents wearing full equipment and carrying rucksacks. The two-week exercise in Quebec included a squad-level biathlon competition, in which the squads conduct a timed cross-country ski movement to a range two to three kilometers away, and then fire a graded Alternate Course C M16 qualification on arrival.

As a method of training for snowshoe movement, Company B also includes in its training regimen physical training on snowshoes, including a yearly snowshoe football tournament. Aside from the obvious physical conditioning and morale gains, this tournament is an excellent way to get soldiers accustomed to running, falling, quickly recovering,

and rapidly changing direction on snowshoes. The result is soldiers who can conduct IMT to standard in deep snow conditions. This training paid great dividends during the raid STX, when the company stayed on snowshoes for almost 48 hours continuously, even during actions on the objective.

Lessons Learned

Clearly, extreme cold weather presents significant challenges to a unit attempting to conduct a raid or any other infantry mission. Cold weather affects operations in a variety of ways, and there are several considerations a commander must incorporate into any mission planning for that type of environment:

Time: Cold and deep snow add a considerable amount of time to everything a unit attempts to accomplish, from movement to maintenance. Since soldiers tire faster during all operations, with potentially life-threatening consequences, extra time must be allowed for adequate rest. Breaking a trail in snow while carrying a soldier's combat load can be exhausting, and frequent changes of point men must be planned. Manipulating equipment, particularly weapons, radios, and night vision goggles, is difficult in the cold because of heavy clothing and cold fingers. Tasks conducted in the extreme cold may take more than three times the normal amount of time.

Cover and Concealment: In cold weather operations, the lack of leaf cover above and below the treeline significantly affects all phases of an operation, from movement to reconnaissance and actions on the objective. Because of the increased danger of aerial and ground observation, leaders must carefully plan soldier and equipment camouflage and route selection, as well as the tactical placement of support-by-fire and other key positions. In addition, deep snow may obliterate normal folds in the ground and cover such obstacles as rocks and ditches.

Track Discipline: Any movement in snow causes a long-lasting and obvious track signature that may cause a unit to be detected. Leaders must plan routes so that track signatures are concealed

from the enemy as much as possible; approaching an objective from behind a major terrain feature, or even using previously packed trails and roads must be considered. Unit movement techniques should be altered to reduce the number of trails that must be broken. Two possible techniques are moving a company in a file or in platoon files. When planning movement, the factors of track discipline, leaders must weigh concealment and difficulties in breaking trails against the need for speed and security. Reconnaissance must be from a vantage point whenever possible, as tracks left while moving close to an objective are likely to be discovered. In a static position such as a patrol base or a defensive position, specified trails must be broken and their use rigidly enforced to reduce the unit's signature in the snow.

Weapon Maintenance: The soldiers' weapons must be kept dry and free of snow. Even the slightest moisture in a weapon can cause it to freeze up and be useless. Soldiers must keep their weapons out of warming tents and snow caves to reduce the possibility of condensation forming and then freezing on them. Break Free lubricant and lightweight weapon oils do not work well in extreme cold. Units should order extreme cold LSA (lubricant, small arms) before beginning a cold weather training cycle. At every halt, leaders must check weapons for snow and moisture; soldiers often fall in the snow and use their weapons as a means of recovery or balance, thereby increasing the chance that bolts will freeze and magazines will stick. Pre-combat checks in an ORP or assault position should always include weapon functions checks, and this requirement is doubly important in the cold.

Communications: Leaders must plan for radio batteries to drain much faster in the cold. Lithium batteries should be used whenever possible to reduce the chance of weak batteries causing communication failures. Like weapons, radios should also be left out of warming tents and snow caves, whenever possible, to prevent condensation.

Discipline: The danger of cold weather injury requires leaders at all

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levels to be especially conscious of their soldiers' condition and whereabouts. This awareness is fundamentally an NCO responsibility. Proper training and rigorous discipline are the only ways to prevent needless injury in the cold; the experience, discipline, and training of our NCOs enabled the entire mountain battalion to remain in the field continuously for two weeks—in snows 8 to 12 feet deep and with average temperatures never exceeding minus 20 degrees—without sustaining a single cold weather injury.

Physical Training: Because of the added rigors of operations in the cold and mountains, soldiers must be at a high state of physical readiness. This requirement is the same for infantry units of all types, and must be enforced. Acclimating soldiers to cold weather

should include physical training in heavy clothing, so soldiers can become accustomed to keeping the correct level of dress for their level of activity. Heavy clothing, boots, snowshoes, an increased load of food to carry, all conspire to drain the soldier's energy. Leaders must enforce hydration; activity in higher elevations and the increased physical demands of the cold weather environment all increase water consumption. Leaders must also plan for a way to keep water from freezing. One technique is to keep canteens inside a layer of clothing instead of on the load-carrying equipment.

Conducting cold weather and mountain operations is only one of the many challenges we face as infantrymen. Like operations in other environments, however, we can overcome those chal-

lenges through training, discipline, and detailed planning. The experiences of the 3d Battalion, 172d Infantry, in the cold and mountains have reinforced for us the importance of these timeless requirements, along with our belief in the Army's absolute reliance on the ability of our NCOs and junior officers to execute these tasks.

Captain James D. Campbell commands Company B and a detachment of the HHC in the 3d Battalion, 172d Infantry (Mountain), in the Maine Army National Guard. He previously served on active duty as an assistant professor of military science at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and commanded a company in the 1st Battalion, 15th Infantry. He is a 1986 ROTC graduate of Colby College and currently a doctoral candidate at the University of Maine.
